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ABSTRACT

A high school English teacher found that one easy way to keep the idea of positive reinforcement foremost in her mind when she works with students was to use writing portfolios. A Portfolio Assessment project was designed in which portfolios were used in two sophomore and two junior regular English classes. A flexible plan was developed for using portfolios in classes taught by two teachers using different syllabi and different writing exercises. Students wrote first drafts, had them peer-edited, revised the essays if necessary, and then submitted them for a grade. Any paper could be revised if the student was not satisfied with his or her grade on that assignment. Parents were encouraged to review the child's work in progress as well as the final product. Results of the first semester were encouraging: approximately 100 of the 130 students completed their portfolios (the remaining students had to take a final exam). Word spread, and teachers as well as other students were envious of those who finished final exam week with less trauma, better results, and far fewer headaches. (A brief description of portfolio assessment, a definition of portfolios, a letter to students describing the Portfolio Assessment project, a list of the types of assignments for portfolio assessment, a sample cover page, instructions for writing a letter to the reader of the portfolio, and a sample table of contents are attached.) (RS)

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Sally G. Hellman

A POSITIVE REPORT CARD

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Students look for and hope for positive reinforcement for the work they have accomplished. Frequently English teachers, as well as others, forget how important this is in their daily work with students. One easy way I have found to keep this idea of positive reinforcement foremost in my mind when I work with students is by using a portfolios. The idea of writing folders isn't a new concept, and using portfolios for assessment is merely an extension of an idea I learned about at the Bay Area Writing Program in 1983. Writing folders are an excellent way for students to keep track of their assignments, for teachers to be able to look at work in progress, and to check that suggested corrections have been made. However, after the semester or school year was over, what happened to the folders? Students either took them home, or more likely threw them away. This indicated that they had never established a feeling of ownership for their work. Portfolios empower students to take more control of their work.

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After attending several workshops at the California Teachers of English conference in 1990, I found the answer to my question of what to do with the folders. I began to call the folders portfolios. More significantly, In addition to renaming them I upgraded the requirements for the contents, established criteria for evaluating the material that would be included, and used them as an assessment device at the end of the semester and/or the school year instead of a final exam. It seemed like a logical idea to me. I was able to convince a colleague and my supervisor that this was a feasible project to investigate, and an idea that could improve my classroom instruction, the students' performance and improve self-esteem for all parties concerned.

We intended to implement the program during the Spring semester of 1990 by involving four English classes in our trial: two Sophomore and two Junior classes of so-called regular English students. Our first chores were to develop the criteria for evaluation, decide on the types and numbers of assignments we would accept, and generate all the forms, and other paper work necessary to get the students started. Since the two

instructors taught from different syllabi and assigned different essays, reports, and different writing exercises, we needed a flexible plan to put our pilot program into operation. This turned out to be the easiest part of the job. We found that we worked easily together and did not both have to be doing the same things at the same time, but could go on with the assignments we had originally planned to use in our respective classes. We also discovered that we were able to encourage students to attempt more advanced types of writing than we had originally planned to assign.

Our assistant principal gave us the greatest assistance in implementing our plans. Because our district has a mandated final exam schedule, we needed special permission to change this requirement so that we could use the students' portfolios in lieu of the final exam. Mr. Ramirez obtained that permission for us. With that obstacle overcome we went ahead. The incentive of not having to take a final exam was a big plus in getting the students to participate in the program. However, we did have to provide an alternate exam for those who did not complete the

portfolio. We assured students that if they did turn in a complete portfolio they would pass that part of the course requirement.

I began my program by explaining to the students what a portfolio was. Students needed to know how it would be used and what their responsibilities were for maintaining their work. It would be necessary for them to keep their drafts, and adhere to timelines and guidelines for assignments. I explained that students would write first drafts, have them peer edited, revise if necessary and turn them in to me. Peer editing sheets were designed for each assignment to provide a structured activity for the students. I would evaluate and grade their papers after a first revision. Any paper that would receive a grade below a C, would be returned to the student for further revision. (Students would not earn a grade for that assignment until a revised/corrected paper was handed in.) In turn, if students were not happy with the grades they had earned, they had the option to revise and turn the papers in again. Students could revise and turn in papers until they were satisfied with their grade, or felt they had done as much as possible with a given assignment.

In addition to all of the handouts given students regarding requirements, peer editing, and the writing process, a letter was sent home to parents outlining the plan. Special emphasis was placed on the school's permission for this portfolio to substitute for a final exam. Parents were encouraged to review their children's work in progress as well as the final graded product. (Selected sample handouts appear at the end of this article.)

We had several objectives in mind in proceeding with the Portfolio Assessment Project. We wanted to encourage greater participation by students in classroom work, and empower them to select the work they wanted evaluated. We also wanted to be able to evaluate the assignments we gave, check on our instruction in teaching writing skills and be able to assess the ongoing work in class without having written examinations at stated periods of time. Since the student population in any "regular" class is extremely varied, there was far more time in class with this system to work with individual students than there was before. Students helped

each other more, were more self-reliant and assumed greater responsibility for their work. The instructors were also able to pinpoint areas where they had been successful in teaching types of writing, specific skills, and places where deficiencies in instruction were apparent.

Results during that first semester were encouraging. Of the 130 students enrolled in the four classes approximately 100 completed the portfolios. That left less than twenty students in each of the classes who had to take final exams. Word spread, and teachers as well as other students were envious of those of us who finished final exam week with less trauma, better results, and far fewer headaches.

As a teacher of English for the past twenty years I have always been more interested in student improvement than in student grades. I have also felt it essential that students in their high school years learn to take more responsibility for their work. I believe that working with portfolios assists in accomplishing both of these objectives.

The current literature certainly supports the idea of portfolios as an alternate method of assessment. Articles in *The Reading Teacher*, *Educational Leadership*, *Instructor*, and publications from the Northwest Evaluation Association and The National Writing Project cite the use of portfolios in many schools all over the country, and not only in English classes. Constant cries for reform and teacher accountability are frequently published in newspapers . Portolios may be one innovation whose time has come, and one which may help answer the cries of both the community and educators.

Portfolio Assessment is not a completely new idea, since many teachers have been using writing folders for a number of years. What appears to be a slightly new wrinkle is the use of these folders or portfolios as a means of assessing a student's body of work. Rather than a one time test, students are empowered to select a body of their work to be evaluated by someone other than their own classroom teacher. This type of assessment also empowers a teacher to evaluate what has been taught, what needs more teaching or reinforcing, and what might be added to or subtracted from the class syllabus.

Educational Leadership has published several articles about this type of assessment in its issues of December, 1987/January, 1988, and in April and November of 1989. Although this idea seems to have developed during the past two years in California, the concept has spread and is not limited to assessing the teaching of writing. The Portfolio Assessment Newsletter* published by the Northwest Evaluation Association has become a clearing house for information and a means of exchanging ideas about this recent addition to the techniques available to teachers to measure the progress of their students and the effectiveness of their teaching strategies.

My colleague and I are recent converts to this idea, and we are extremely enthusiastic about he success we have had with this process in our classrooms. We plan to continue this program next year and add to the types of assignments we expect our students to attempt, and we will therefore be adding to our own knowledge and expertise as teachers.

Throughout the course of a school year material from many different sources is used in our classrooms. In addition to textbooks, we use supplementary material published by Scholastic Writing Magazine, The New Yorker, The Reader's Digest , Time, Newsweek, and other current periodicals. These publications provide many of the models we use with our students. We have included those models we had permission to use, and are certain teachers will be able to select appropriate models as needed from their own sources.

We most gratefully acknowledge all the help we have had from teachers in both our local area and elsewhere. During the course of our combined forty years of teaching, we have attended workshops, conferences, in-services, university classes, etc. Many teachers have generously shared ideas, handouts, worksheets, and professional assistance. We thank them all, and sincerely hope that what we share here will be of value to them .

*Northwest Evaluation Association, 5 Centerpoint Drive, Suite 100, Lake Oswego, Oregon 97053.

DEFINITION OF PORTFOLIOS

A PORTFOLIO IS AN APPROPRIATE TOOL TO MEASURE AND REFLECT STUDENT PERFORMANCE. THE PORTFOLIO PROCESS IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS TO ASSEMBLE A PURPOSEFUL AND SUBSTANTIAL COLLECTION OF THEIR WORK WHICH ILLUSTRATES THEIR EFFORTS, PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS.

A CRITIICAL COMPONENT OF THE PORTFOLIO SHOULD BE THE STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN THE SELECTION OF THE PORTFOLIO'S CONTENT. THE STUDENT SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN THIS PROCESS OF SELECTING THE PIECES TO BE INCLUDED. CRITERIA FOR SELECTING STUDENT WORK, AS WELL AS CRITERIA FOR JUDGING THE STUDENT WORK MUST EXIST. AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE PORTFOLIO IS EVIDENCE OF STUDENT SELF-REFLECTION, (METACOGNITION) ABOUT THE INCLUDED CONTENT. THIS APPEARS IN THE FORM OF A LETTER WRITTEN BY THE STUDENT DESCRIBING EACH SELECTION, AND THE REASON FOR ITS INCLUSION.

PORTFOLIOS MAY HAVE DIFFERENT PURPOSES FOR DIFFERENT PERFORMANCE AREAS, OR DISCIPLINES. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE TEACHERS INVOLVED, THE STUDENTS AND THE ADMINISTRATORS HAVE A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF THE PURPOSES OF THE PORTFOLIOS. IF THESE PORTFOLIOS ARE TO FUNCTION AS AN ASSESSMENT DOCUMENT THAT MUST BE CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD AND AGREED TO BY ALL. IT IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT THAT THE STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THAT THIS IS AN EITHER /OR SITUATION. IF THEY COMPLETE AND HAND IN THEIR PORTFOLIOS, BUT ARE NOT SATISFIED WITH THE EVALUATION IT RECEIVES, THEY CANNOT THEN HAVE THE OPTION TO TAKE A FINAL EXAM. TEACHERS MUST THEREFORE HAVE A FINAL EXAM AVAILABLE IN EACH CLASS, SINCE THE PORTFOLIO IS THE ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT DOCUMENT.

THE COMPONENTS OF THE PORTFOLIO WILL DEPEND ON THE GRADE LEVEL, COURSE OF INSTRUCTION , ASSIGNMENTS GIVEN IN THE CLASS, AND CRITERIA ESTABLISHED BY THE TEACHERS.

Dear Student:

This semester you are being offered a unique opportunity to improve your writing abilities, and learn more about the process of writing. These skills will help you in your other classes at Las Vegas High School, and even better prepare you for college, if college is in your future. In addition, if you participate in this program, you will not have to take a final exam in this English class.

This project is called Portfolio Assessment. You will keep a portfolio of your writing assignments, which will include all of your drafts, notes, etc. Most of your writing assignments will be read by another student in the class (peer editing) and also by the instructor, who will evaluate and grade your paper. You will have the opportunity to revise your papers to improve your grade, until you are satisfied with what you have done.

At the end of each semester you will hand in a portfolio of your work (which has already been revised and graded), and a teacher other than your instructor will read and evaluate this portfolio. This grade will be the grade you receive for the final exam part of your semester grade. NO STUDENT WHO HANDS IN A CORRECTLY COMPLETED PORTFOLIO WILL FAIL THIS PART OF THE SEMESTER GRADE.

This project enables you, the student, to take charge of your work and select what you want included in the portfolio. This is, as we said earlier in this letter, a unique opportunity for you to be more responsible for your work and your grade in this class. We hope you will decide to participate in this program.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Hellman and Mrs. Roberts

Types of Assignments for Portfolio Assessment

1. Descriptive Essays
    a. Describing a person or character
    b. Describing a place
    c. Describing an object or an abstract concept
    d. Describing a mixture of things - combining two or more of the above
    e. Describing an observation - a saturation report

2. Narrative Essays
    a. Recounting (retelling) a true incident
    b. Creating a fictional story (may be based on a true incident)

3. Expository Essays - An essay which passes on information, explains something such as a process, a term, a thought or an idea

4. Persuasive Essays - An essay which tries to persuade or convince the audience to agree with the writer. (May need research for supporting evidence.)

5. Opinion Essays - An essay which expresses an opinion on a specific subject or issue.

6. Comparison/Contrast Essays - An essay explaining how two things are alike and/or different. The essay may also be either comparison or contrast. The subject matter may be varied, e.g. fashion, education, movies, television, pieces of literature, etc.

7. Poetry - Two to three selections of poems written by the student based on models supplied by the teacher or student generated.

8. Research - An independent project designed by the student, or an I -Search or I Search a Word project.

9. Wild Card - Students have a choice from a variety of fiction options: fable, myth, legend, short story, etc. , or a type of writing of their choice.

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

COMPLETED BY

(NAME OF STUDENT)

CLASS

TEACHER

DATE

Instructions for Letter to the Reader

This letter to the reader should contain an explanation of why each of the items included in the portfolio was selected. Letters should not all begin " I chose this because"...

This letter should contain some reflection on the part of the writer about what the writer has accomplished, learned, failed to learn, or wishes he/she had learned about writing in this class.

This letter may also contain an analysis of each of the assignments with suggestions to the instructor for change, improvements, etc.

Students may be asked to consider any or all of the following when writing the self-reflection (metacognative) letter on the selections chosen to be included in the portfolio.

Was the writing an early or later attempt?
How long did the writer spend on this piece?
Is this a piece that shows the writer's progress?
What process was followed to develop this piece of writing?
What difficulties were encountered in completing the assignment?
What specific strengths does this piece exhibit?
What specific help did the writer receive during the editing process?
What was learned learned during the process about the writer's progress in completing the selection?

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1. Letter to the reader

2. Item #1 (Description of item selected - title of assignment)

3. Item #2 "

4. Item #3 "

5. Item #4 "

6. Item #5 "

7. Item #6 "

8. Item #7 "